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ABSTRACT

In view of the vast amounts of Native American stereotyping that exists in the United States today, English teachers should analyze ways to reduce the effects of such stereotypes. Despite recent attempts to raise ethnic consciousness, American popular culture still perpetuates and reinforces Indian stereotypes, and these prevailing images block true perceptions of what American Indians really are. In the context of the English curriculum, English teachers can present literature in ways which neither reinforce nor perpetuate these stereotypes. In the past, widespread improvement in the understanding of American Indians was undermined by the largely superficial treatment they received in the schools. In view of this, students should be shown the nature and historical development of stereotypes, as outlined by various researchers. Media like literature and films have perpetuated many misconceptions of American Indians. These media have grouped Indians into four basic stereotype categories: the noble savage, the savage, the generic Indian, and the living fossil. To combat these tendencies, English teachers must pay attention to curriculum content by trying to teach a representative set of Indian-authored selections. The following criteria can be used to make such selections: (1) readings should be supplemented with oral selections; (2) both oral and written selections should represent the diversity of the many tribes throughout the nation; and (3) contemporary selections should reflect the range of genres produced by American Indian writers. (Contains 32 references.) (HB)

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# OF MASCOTS AND TOMAHAWK CHOPS: STEREOTYPES OF AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE ENGLISH TEACHER'S RESPONSE

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# OF MASCOTS AND TOMAHAWK CHOPS: STEREOTYPES OF AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE ENGLISH TEACHER'S RESPONSE



## Introduction

There is no better time than right now, with Thanksgiving looming, for English teachers to consider the topic of American Indian stereotypes. Coupled with Halloween, Thanksgiving helps form what Michael Dorris calls "the annual twin peaks of Indian stereotyping" (Dorris 1978). In the midst of the quincentennial celebrations of Columbus'encounter with America, the twin peaks of 1992 offer us the best occasion yet for analysis of what English teachers can do to reduce the effects of stereotypes of American Indians.

In the days ahead, sales of construction paper will skyrocket as elementary school teachers require their students to make headbands complete with obligatory rainbow of colored "feathers." Grocery bags will make good Indian clothes and instead of sacred paints, moms' lipstick will suffice. Students will sit quietly, "Indian style," hoping to avoid their teachers' admonishment, "Stop acting like wild Indians!" Secondary-level students, avid consumers of visual media, formulate images of American Indians based on contemporary films. They see depictions of American Indians as nobles (the quiet Lakota man in Dances with Wolves, for example), as mystics (the Indian character in Poltergeist, for example), and as savages (the half-breed, in Lonesome Dove and the entire Pawnee tribe in Dances with Wolves, for example). More generally, since Hollywood has very little time for anything contemporary about Indians, students grant American Indians equal status with dinosaurs--interesting, but extinct.

Elementary school teachers and Hollywood are not the sole purveyors of Indian stereotypes. American popular culture sanctions stereotypical treatment of the American Indian experience. The business community, from professional sports to advertising and marketing to restaurants and bars, does its part. The Atlanta Braves provide a forum for adults to

reenact their elementary school Indian experiences. In Fulton County stadium, fans arrive technicolor-clad, wielding foam rubber tomahawks, and chanting incessant nonsense. In South Carolina, a TV ad and billboard campaign urged fans to attend baseball games where they could watch the Greenville Braves' (the Atlanta Braves' AA farm team) "...surround their opponents and beat them with sticks." "Chief's" Restaurant in Spartanburg, SC features chicken wings and "fire water." Despite the consciousness-raising 1960's and early 1970's, and despite the recent popularity of Dances with Wolves, American popular culture and American schools still perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes of American Indians.

Prevailing images of what non-Indians think American Indians are supposed to be block our perception of what American Indians really are. According to Robert Berkhofer (1978),

> For most whites throughout the past five centuries, the Indian of imagination and ideology has been as real, perhaps more real than the Native American of actual existence and contact... (71).

The roots of these stereotypes run deep into history. English teachers can help their students overcome the misunderstanding of the American Indian experience, particularly of the American Indian literary experience, caused by stereotypes. If English teachers themselves understand the historical development of stereotypes of American Indians and can recognize them in literary works, in textbooks, and in the popular culture, they can then take appropriate and practical steps to help their students avoid reinforcing and perpetuating the stereotypes. Today, I would like to describe and trace the development of these stereotypes. Focusing on curriculum, I would also like to suggest some ways English teachers can achieve the goal of presenting literature in ways which neither reinforce nor perpetuate stereotypes of American Indians.

Baggage and Confusion

Students in our English classes are likely to suffer from an affliction we can call "American Indian confusion." During the late 1960's and early 1970's, many high school English teachers attempted to sensitize students to the realities of the American Indian experience through literature study. A few examples of literature authored by American Indians appeared in state-adopted textbooks. Typically, these were short song-poems often treated as "primitive, repetitive image poems" (Theisz, 1977, 50-53) or orations by famous Indian chiefs usually of the "surrender speech" genre (Chief Josephs's "I Will Fight No More Forever," was, and continues to be, frequently anthologized). Novels and other works with American Indian protagonists and thematic content (often written by non-Indians) were popular selections for in-class study. Hal Borland's When the Legends Die, for example, was added to many secondary-level English curricula. Vine Deloria, Jr. points out that during the 1970's American Indians enjoyed another period of popularity which cyclically recurs every fifteen to twenty years (Evers, 1978, p. 81). Students of the day read Dee Brown's Bury My At Wounded Knee and quoted Chief Sealth's speech, "This Sacred Soil."

Often, however, literature teachers' efforts to raise awareness and sensitivity were undermined by colleagues in the Social Studies who glossed over and failed to consider the American Indian point of view on topics such as the federal government's removal, assimilation and termination policies, "manifest destiny," boarding schools, the nefarious activities of various Christian missionaries, and the erosion of religious freedoms for American Indians. English teachers often subverted their own instructional objectives through the use of poorly compiled literature textbooks, textbooks which actually reinforced stereotypes of American Indians (Charles, 1987; 1989).

The uneven and largely superficial treatment American Indian content received in schools effectively derailed hopes for widespread, meaningful and far-reaching improvement in the level of understanding of the American Indian experience. Therefore, teachers, many of us the

"products" of similar treatment of the American Indian experience in our own education, find confused students in our English classes. Our students carry the heavy baggage of stereotypes with them. Possessing a vague, superficial, contradictory, and distorted understanding of American Indians, students believe American Indians are mystical yet simple. They believe them to be nearly extinct, but the few who are alive are out west somewhere probably unemployed, drunk, and not real Indians anyway because they drive pickup trucks and wear bluejeans. An understanding of the nature and historical development of stereotypes is a necessary starting point for those of us who want to help students come to grips with the reality of the American Indian experience.

Stereotypes

A stereotype, according to Allport (1958) is "...an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category" (187). Brigham (1963) adds specificity to Allport's definition by underscoring the negative nature of stereotypes:

> Most researchers seem to have viewed stereotypes as generalizations, concerning trait attributes, made about members of a...group. A theme which recurs in most discussions of stereotypes refers to their undesirable nature--a stereotype is usually seen as a generalization which is, in some sense, undesirable (206).

Historical Development of Stereotypes of American Indians

Berkhofer (1978) traces the historical development of stereotypes of American Indians back to the European literary and artistic traditions of primitivism and romanticism. He demonstrates how the stereotypic image of American Indians pervades scientific, philosophical, and cultural considerations of the American Indian experience as well as the impact of these misconceptions on governmental Indian policy, a policy marked by schizophrenic shifts from demands for assimilation to demands for American Indian self-determination.

Deloria (1973) critiques the wave of ostensibly sensitive works with American Indian themes and images produced in the late 1960's and early 1970's:

> Thus it is that the cherished image of the noble redman is preserved by American society for its own purposes.... The ...books reflect that there exists in the minds of non-Indian Americans a vision of what they would like Indians to be. They stubbornly refuse to allow Indians to be or to become anything else (emphasis added, 50).

And, as a result, Deloria continues,

> Indians are unable to get non-Indians to accept them as contemporary beings. Non-Indians either cannot or will not respond to the problems of contemporary Indians. They insist on remaining in the last century..., reciting a past that is basically mythological, thrilling, and comforting (56).

Several researchers have examined the impact of popular culture on the creation, reinforcement, and perpetuation of stereotypes of American Indians. In his study of movies and popular fiction, Stedman (1982) maintains that stereotypes of American Indians dominate these media. He describes writers' perpetuation of stereotypes of American Indians through the use of referents such as Buck, Half-Breed, Heap Big, Honest Injun, Indian Giver, Papoose, Scalper, Squaw, and Wild Indian (242). Filmmakers are no less guilty of stereotyping American Indians. Stedman lists the following misconceptions of American Indian life and culture which contemporary films reinforce and perpetuate: Indians talk like Tonto; Indians look, think, and talk alike; Indians fight at night; Indians howl constantly during attacks; Indians torture their prisoners; Indians scalp the slain; all Indians worship a being named "Manitou;" Indians are expert outdoorsmen; Indians wander like nomads; Indians lust after white women; Indians cannot resist whiskey; Indians have no spouses of their own; Indians flounder when attempting to speak English; and Indians

speak a common language called *Indian* (243-244).

According to Churchill, et al. (in Bataille and Silet, 1980) Hollywood produces films about Indians which are narrowly limited in thematic substance. Essentially, Hollywood productions depict American Indians in three ways--American Indians as creatures of a particular time; American Indians as seen through white eyes; and "Seen one Indian, seen them all" (Bataille and Silet, 37). Lyman (1982), in an analysis of the "scientific" and ethnographic work of the photographer Edwin S. Curtis, disclosed the use of technical processes such as retouching, shadowing, and scratching by Curtis and his assistants to make American Indian subjects look more "Indian," to enhance the underlying message of Curtis' work--that American Indians were "the vanishing race."

These stereotypic images began with the *bon sauvage* motif in European literature of the 18th century, continued with American writers' depictions of Indians as both noble savages and warrior-savages, and persist today with characterizations of Indians as hopeless people unable to cope with "life between two worlds." Stereotypes fill the pages of American literature as well as television and movie screens. For non-Indians it is difficult to distinguish between fact and myth when dealing with American Indians and their cultures. Tourists in Indian Country, gawking at American Indian people, can be heard frequently asking, "Is that a <u>real</u> Indian?"

<u>Stereotype Categories</u>

**Noble Savage.** The earliest stereotype of American Indians, the noble savage, sprang from the European artistic movements of primitivism and romanticism. According to Berkhofer (1978) "primitivism postulated people dwelling in nature according to nature, existing free of histories, burdens, and the social complexity felt by Europeans..., and offering hope to mankind at the same time that they constituted a powerful counter-example to existing European civilization" (72). Out of this tradition came the motifs of the noble, beautiful, and romantic savage. Early manifestations of these motifs can be found in Longfellow's <u>The Song of</u>

Hiawatha (1890). Contemporary manifestations of this stereotype include the images of American Indians used in anti-litter campaigns and the recent "I can make it rain on the golf course" United Airlines commercial.

**The Savage.** Another stereotype, the savage, depicts American Indians, not as beautiful or romantic, but rather as ruthless and blood-thirsty. This characterization of Indians, which portrayed them as sub-humans, developed as whites moved westward under the auspices of "manifest destiny." American Indians in the savage mold murdered and scalped whites, and pillaged white settlements--all the result of something in their genetic makeup. According to Merlock (1990) the character Blue Duck in the critically acclaimed and highly rated television mini-series "Lonesome Dove" (based on the Larry McMurtry novel) is the definitive example of the Hollywood/western stock character, the half-breed--an individual with too much American Indian blood in him to be tame, a monstrous and vicious villain. Another curious manifestation of this stereotype is the "lazy, shiftless Indian." Many criticize contemporary Indians' use of bingo as a revenue source as resorting to easy money, to an anti-traditional means of achieving economic self-sufficiency. Indians' attempt at self-determination is ridiculed and undermined--"real, traditional" Indians did not play bingo; therefore, bingo can not be a legitimate enterprise. Today, non-Indian legislators, thinking they know what's best for Indian people, attempt to regulate Indians out of the bingo business.

**Generic Indian.** American Indians are a singular people, sharing the same social, spiritual, cultural, and linguistic traditions according to a third stereotype category, the generic Indian. The most prevalent manifestation of the generic Indian stereotype equates all Indian cultures with those of the Plains tribes. As a result, all Indians wear feathered war bonnets, live in teepees, and greet strangers with the Lakota word, *"hau"* (defined "hello" in Mathieu, et al., 11). According to Bataille and Silet (1980), "Even the visible cultural characteristics which tend to individuate tribal groupings begin to blend into an all encompassing haze" (37). Today,

tourists insist on seeing feathers, hearing bells, and witnessing the war dance when they visit Indian Country, whether or not feathers and bells and war dancing are aspects of the culture of the tribe they barge in on.

**Living fossil.** A fourth stereotype category, the living fossil, characterizes American Indian people as extinct or nearly extinct, both racially and culturally. Those who believe in this stereotype view American Indians as either totally assimilated or as feebly clinging to drastically altered remnants of their "once proud past." This stereotype became prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century, thanks in part to popular literature and art. George Catlin, the famous painter of American Indians, once moaned,

> Nature has nowhere presented more beautiful and lovely scenes than those of the vast prairies of the west and of the men and beast no nobler specimens than those who inhabit them--the Indian and the buffalo--joint and original tenants of the soil, and fugitives together from the approach of civilized man; they have fled to the Great Plains of the west, and there under equal doom, they have taken their last abode, where their race will expire and their bones will bleach together... (in Berkhofer 89).

The anti-litter television commercial campaigns mentioned earlier rely on a "fossilized" depiction of American Indians. American Indian environmental activists paddle canoes and wear buckskins rather than drive pickups and wear bluejeans. The use of the living fossil stereotype underscores one message of these ads--"Unless you protect the environment, you will die out just like the American Indians did."

Practical Suggestions for Secondary-level English Teachers

Following an increased understanding of the nature, historical development, and prevalence of stereotypes of American Indians, an additional step in an English teacher's effort to combat the reinforcement and perpetuation of these stereotypes is the selection of appropriate

curriculum content. English teachers should teach students a **representative** set of American Indian-authored selections. A truly representative sample of works by American Indian authors is balanced with respect to the following criteria:

**1. Oral (traditional) selections, including both song-poems and oral narratives, should supplement assigned reading.** According to Lincoln (1983),

> The oral literatures or native cultures lie deeply rooted in America. Radically diverse languages, life styles, ecologies, and histories have survived more than forty thousand years 'native' to America.... Their oral literatures are made up from a daily speech, a teaching folklore, a ritual sense of ceremony and religion, a heritage passed on generation to generation in songs, legends, morality plays, healing rites, event-histories, social protocol, jokes, spiritual rites of passage, and vision journeys to the sacred world. These cultural traditions evolved before the Old World discovered the New World (15-16).

Scholars from the fields of anthropology, folklore, linguistics, American literature, and American Indian Studies have collected numerous examples of American Indian song-poems and oral narratives. Excerpts from numerous works containing oral narratives and song-poems from various American Indians tribes representing various regions of the United States should supplement assigned textbook reading. Recent works characterized by thorough and sensitive treatment of American Indian oral literary genres include YAQUI DEER SONGS/*MASO BWIKAM* (1987) by Larry Evers and Felipe Molina, AMERICAN INDIAN MYTHS AND LEGENDS (1984) edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, OMAHA TRIBAL MYTHS AND TRICKSTER TALES (1981) edited by Roger Welsch, BUCKSKIN TOKENS (1975) edited by R. D. Theisz, AMERICAN

INDIAN MYTHOLOGY (1968) edited by Alice Marriott and Carol Rachlin, and THE STORYTELLING STONE (1971) edited by Susan Feldman. Reading such works helps to break down the "living fossils" stereotype by showing students that American Indian oral traditions are alive today, as are the people themselves. The lifeways of the people--their values, morals, and humor--are perpetuated through contemporary examples of traditional literatures.

**2. Both oral (traditional) and written (contemporary) selections should be presented to students.** To accurately convey the diverse nature of American Indian literatures, English teachers should spend adequate instructional time on oral (traditional) works. Many of these oral works have been recorded and translated into English. Sources of oral literature include YAQUI DEER SONGS/ *MASO BWIKAM* (1987) by Larry Evers and Felipe Molina, SPIRIT MOUNTAIN (1984) edited by Leanne Hinton and Lucille Watahomigie, BETWEEN SACRED MOUNTAINS (1984) edited by Sam Bingham and Janet Bingham, THE SOUTH CORNER OF TIME (1981) edited by Larry Evers, and BUCKSKIN TOKENS (1975) edited by R. D. Theisz. Use of such sources helps students realize that American Indians have traditions, languages, beliefs, and cultures which are both traditional and vibrant. Coming to this realization helps students reject the "living fossils" stereotype.

There is a growing body of written (contemporary) work, as well, by American Indian authors. Anthologies, containing written works in various genres by writers from various tribes across the country, are excellent sources for readings to supplement and complement those in state-adopted literature anthologies. Some of these anthologies include THE SINGING SPIRIT (1989) edited by Bernd Peyer, SONGS FROM THIS EARTH ON TURTLE'S BACK (1983) edited by Joseph Bruchac, EARTH POWER COMING: SHORT FICTION IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE (1983) edited by Simon Ortiz, THE REMEMBERED EARTH (1979) edited by Geary Hobson, and AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE:

AN ANTHOLOGY (1979) edited by Alan R.Velie. Reading selections from the ever-growing body of contemporary written works by American Indian writers conveys to students that Indian people can speak for themselves, clearly and articulately, on the issues facing them as a contemporary people. The implied message that American Indians need whites to speak for them, an aspect of the "savage" stereotype, is thus destroyed.

**3. Oral (traditional) and written (contemporary) selections should represent the diversity of American Indian tribes and communities from various regions of the United States.** An analysis of South Carolina's state-adopted high school literature anthologies indicated a lack of representation of works by members of American Indians tribes and communities from regions other than the Great Plains and Southwestern United States. Of 64 anthologized selections by American Indians, 45, or 70%, were by authors from the Plains and Southwestern regions of the country (Charles, 1989). The texts' lack of adequate regional representation in its sample of American Indian literature contributes to the perpetuation of the "generic Indian" stereotype. English teachers should take steps to expand the sample of American Indian selections they teach.

**4. Contemporary (written) selections should reflect the range of genres, both fiction and non-fiction, produced by American Indian authors**. The analysis of South Carolina's textbooks also revealed that only 3 of 23 anthologized contemporary selections by American Indian authors were non-fictional (Charles, 1989). This lack of balanced representation reinforces the living fossils stereotype--it is assumed by many that American Indian writers do not concern themselves with contemporary issues, nor do they possess the rhetorical skill necessary to argue persuasively. Students are led to believe that American Indians are "trapped" hopelessly in the past and that they lack the necessary linguistic facility to be considered anything other than "repetitive, imagistic poets." Supplementing assigned literature anthologies with a work such as

Hobson's THE REMEMBERED EARTH (1979) will help teachers and their students avoid reinforcing the "living fossils" stereotype by providing students with an accurate and representative sample of the range of writing interests and abilities of contemporary American Indian writers.

Conclusion

To this point, I have suggested that more careful selection of literature content for English courses will aid both teachers and students in overcoming stereotypes of American Indians. Following these suggestions, English teachers can select course content which conveys to students a more balanced and accurate representation of the diverse American Indian literary experience. In so doing, English teachers can help to eradicate one of the few remaining overtly sanctioned forms of racism in America--stereotypes of American Indians.

OF MASCOTS AND TOMAHAWK CHOPS: STEREOTYPES OF AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE ENGLISH TEACHER'S RESPONSE
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